In 1892, John and Ada Griffin built this house at 1643 Grand Avenue. It was restored in 1973. At left, the house at 1393 Franklin Avenue was built in 1897 by Captain Hiram Brown. It was restored by Vera Gault and Bruce Berney.

Old Astorian Homes

The Benjamin Young house at 3652 Duane Avenue was built in 1888 and is still the residence of third and fourth generations of the Young family. It was erected on the original bank of the Columbia River.

Pioneer architect and builder Albert Ferguson and his son designed and built this house at 1667 Grand Avenue in 1882. Roger Tetlow is currently restoring the residence.

Photos by Dan Carter

Cannery owner George W. Sanborn built this home at 1711 Grand Avenue in 1890. At right, is the home of John Henry Dix Gray, built mostly of cedar, at 1687 Grand Avenue in 1880.

It was 1873. Money was pouring into Astoria and suddenly, everyone in town wanted to be the...

VICTORIAN ASTORIANS

Elegant, suave, and knowledgeable, DeWitt Clinton Ireland brought the Gilded Age with him when he came to town as the first Victorian Astorian...and the town was never the same again.

by Roger Tetlow

The golden glow of what Mark Twain called the Gilded Age had moved across most of the country by the spring of 1873, reflecting the beginning of an age of opulence, of elegance, and of prudery. Victoriana was the vogue, and the styles of clothing, housing, and manners all catered to this new age. Unfortunately, the little waterfront village of Astoria was not even aware that times had changed.

For many years, the venerable old village had slumbered on the south side of the Columbia River, not paying much attention to what was going on in the rest of the world. Explorers, fur traders, Indians, sea captains, and other exotic types had come and gone while Astoria napped, waiting for something to happen. Nothing much did for too many years but, at the same time, other towns in Oregon were growing and prospering.

In 1866, however, Astorians suddenly discovered that they could make money by catching and canning some of the millions of salmon that passed by their doorsteps daily. Canneries, bunkhouses, and related industries sprang up overnight, and suddenly, Astoria was awake and growing.

Astoria was still not much in 1873. There were more docks, canneries, and sawmills built out over the water, and there may have been a thousand permanent residents living in the town at that time, but no one was quite sure. There were too many transients coming and going all the time. The population grew and declined with the seasons.

But there was new money in town. The rugged old pioneers suddenly found that they could afford a new wagon or even a new horse without straining their pocketbooks. Wives threw away their gingham Mother Hubbards and bought ready-made dresses at the local mercantile. The kids wore shoes and there were even a few maids living in the back lean-tos. Prosperity had come to Astoria in that gentle sunlit spring of 1873.

At last, even though they were not aware of it, the people of Astoria were ready and willing to embrace the ornate, decorative, and stuffy appearances of the Victorian way of life. For the first time, wistful longings stirred in the tough old hearts of the women of Astoria. The years of struggle were behind them but what was there to look forward to? They didn't much like what they had and wanted something better, but they didn't quite know what that should be. They needed someone to tell them what to do.

A Newspaperman's Gift

DeWitt Clinton Ireland, the man who would lead the people of Astoria into the Victorian Age, arrived in Astoria on the river steamer **Emma Stewart** in the spring of 1873. Elegant, suave, intelligent, and knowledgeable, Ireland came to Astoria bringing a gift that would change the town almost overnight from a bucolic village into a fine example of small-town Victoriana at its best. DeWitt Clinton Ireland was a newspaperman and he had come to Astoria to found a new paper, the **Tri-Weekly Astorian.**

Ireland, however, was more than just a newspaperman. He was a fine writer, a born crusader, a booster of towns, people, and manners, and a genuinely friendly and sociable man who was able to get along with almost anyone. He was equally at home on the waterfront or in a fine salon. He had seen the first glimmerings of Victorian society in New York, in Chicago, and in St. Paul, and had liked it. Ireland belonged to the Victorian Age. Astoria did not realize it at the time but Ireland was the city's first Victorian. Using his newspaper as a tool, he was able to remake Astoria's society into a Victorian one. Astoria was never the same again.

A group of young Victorian Astorians relax prettily after a day of strenuous Victorian activities. Back row, l. to r., May Hobson, May McIntosh, Lily Crosby, Front Row, Ada Ferguson, Maud Hobson, Jamie Taylor, and Theresa Loeb.

Scorning the hillside, Captain George Flavel built this huge wedding-cake of a mansion for his family in town near the courthouse. This house is still regarded as one of the best examples of Victorian architecture in Oregon.

Saddle Mountain was a fun place to go in 1879 and this group of young Victorian Astorians look ready to tackle any sport that might come their way. Top Row - Hope Ferguson, Will Gibson, C.W. Fulton, A.W. Berry, Will Strong. 2nd Row - Esther Holden, Kate Taylor, Mrs. Taylor, Annie Arndt, Mance Young. Front Row - Will Ladd, Florence Carnahan, Fred Strong, Ada Fulton, Brenham Van Dusen, Frank Taylor.

There was no Astoria society at the time, so Ireland created one. There were no important names, so he chose a few logical ones and built them into prominence. In his newspaper, he turned gossip into news, and everyday occurrences into happenings of interest. He knew what his readers wanted even before they knew themselves, and he gave it to them.

How do you start a society? Ireland knew the answer to this question and promptly used his newspaper to create one. People, if they were to become society names, had to go places and do things. Then, other people, not as lucky, had to know that the society people had gone to these places and had done these things. From the beginning, the columns of the **Tri-Weekly Astorian** were filled with the names of Astorians who were doing things and going places.

DeWitt Clinton Ireland went everywhere that first year, writing about it later in his newspaper. He danced the schottische with Miss Mary Taylor at the Astoria Firemen's Grand Ball, acted as Santa Claus for the city's first Christmas celebration, and even attended the opera when a small company timidly decided to present its wares to the embryo society of Astoria. Ireland applauded the Richards-Bernard Opera Company but turned up his nose at the town's only hall, saying, "As a dancing hall, there can be none better, but the uncomfortable seats, saw-dust floors, rough and unfinished stage and similar trappings are enough to make Astorians ashamed, and a shame it is."

This was heady stuff to the culture-starved people of Astoria. Now, they were patrons of the arts, according to Ireland. Suddenly, the Astorians began to feel a need for the outer trappings of a Victorian society. After all, if they were to go places to be seen and noticed, they would have to be dressed in the latest styles. Proud and prosperous mamas promptly took the first boat to San Francisco, dragging their offspring with them. Clothes make the man or the woman, and the city to the south had what they wanted. Soon, well dressed men and women, sporting the very latest styles as dictated by society, were patronizing all local events of any importance.

But what was the use of having fancy clothes if you lived in a plain house? The women of Astoria examined their undistinguished homes, built for utility rather than comfort, and didn't like what they saw. The houses just were not Victorian.

Then, they looked up at the high hill, towering above them to the south. There were no docks up there and no smelly canneries. Up there, new houses could be seen and admired. Up there, Astorians began to build their new Victorian homes.

One by one, the big houses went up, each a bit more decorative than the last. Stoops became porches, and then piazzas. Carpenters worked day and night, fashioning scrolls, swirls, wainscots, brackets, window caps, architraves, rosettes, and finials with which to dress up the new houses. "Fine men build fine houses" was a popular axiom of the day, and the proper kind of a dwelling showed the world what kind of family lived in it. Appearances were what mattered and so the houses were built for appearance's sake.

Houses on the Hill

Capt. J.H.D. Gray led the way by building a fine residence seven blocks up the hill on what had been a forested hillside. Capt. Boelling erected a fine two-storied home on a nearby hill, while Capt. Merriman built a "substantial dwelling house" on Exchange Avenue. Peter Cherry put a fine house on Fifteenth, the Van Dusens built on Franklin, Col. Taylor on Franklin, while Hiram Brown erected a house, also on Franklin, for his newly-wedded daughter. There were many others built during the ten years following 1873.

In contrast to some of the more elaborate homes built later, many of these first Victorian homes were almost plain and undecorated. But as the years passed, each new house blossomed out with more and more decorations and ornaments. Albert Ferguson, an Astoria builder, finally decided to outdo the others and built himself a house on Grand Avenue. It was a stiffly-high, three-storied house, covered inside and out with sawn ornaments and carpenter Gothic. Calling upon all of his skills, Ferguson decorated the house with the finest woods available, and then capped his work off with a circular staircase, the only one in town. As an afterthought, he built an equally fine but smaller house right next door for his newly-wedded daughter, Ada.

At first, there were no streets up on the hill, but these houses were owned by women whose men ran the town. "Henry, get that street in." And the street went in, scooped out of the hillside using the muscles of a hundred Chinamen. Sidewalks were built, trees planted, and fences put up to encircle green expanses of lawn. Soon, the spires, towers, widow's walks, gables, and observatories of the big Victorian houses could be seen from below, on the wooden streets and docks of the town. It was a sight to behold, to see Victoriana rising from the wilderness.

DeWitt Clinton Ireland approved of all of this building activity and did what he could to let the town know

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DeWitt Clinton Ireland was already famous as a newspaperman when he came to Astoria in 1873 to found the Tri-Weekly Astorian, later to become the Daily Astorian. He had founded the Oregon City Enterprise in 1866 and had worked for both the Portland Oregonian and the Portland Bulletin. He took Astoria's embryo society and formed it into the finest Victorian society in Oregon.

All drawings done by Gale Hubbell, well-known Astoria artist.

The Gust Holmes home, one of the few Victorian houses in Astoria's Uppertown. Holmes, a cannery owner, built this house in 1890 on Holmes Hill.

Peter Cherry, British consul in Astoria, built this home in 1883 on Fifteenth Street, high on the hill.

Annie Brown received this Victorian home from her father, Capt. Hiram Brown, when she was married to Judge Page in 1879.

Built by Conrad Boelling, this fine home became the residence of Marshall Kinney, one of Astoria's first cannery owners in 1884.

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just who was creating these fine new homes. He followed the building of each one, reporting faithfully on this progress in the pages of what was by this time, the Daily Astorian.

Now that there were houses to be seen and admired, Ireland brought in a new custom to see that people did just that. One New Year's Day, the indefatigable Ireland led the men of Astoria on a round of "making calls." He may have had some trouble getting the husbands to go along on his tour, but the women of the town embraced the idea instantly. Once more, Ireland led the way, towing the embryo socialites into another Victorian custom.

Afterwards, Ireland wrote, "The time-honored custom of making calls was almost universal, and were we to attempt to enumerate the houses where company was received and entertained by the good wives and daughters of our townspeople, we should positively do someone an injustice. If we were to essay a list embracing the names of gentlemen who enrolled themselves as callers, according to the time-honored custom of the Knickerbockers, we feel that we should omit some names, for the good reason that nearly everybody joined the rank and file."

Using descriptive phrases such as "sumptuous repast," "royally entertained," and "palatial mansion," Ireland devoted several columns of his newspaper to a description of the journey, taken in the name of society by the men of Astoria. Society craved names and Ireland gave them names, listing each and every person who served, greeted, strolled, entertained, poured, and presided. It was a great day for all concerned and set the pattern for society life during those coming years.

Capt. George Flavel, an old-time bar pilot and businessman, waited until almost everyone else in town had built new houses before putting up one of his own. Scorning the hillside area, Flavel erected a huge, wedding-cake of a mansion for his family, placing it squarely in the center of a city block of land he owned on the flat land near the courthouse. Decorated with verandas, cupolas, railings, scrolls, rosettes, and every other Victorian decoration imaginable, the Flavel mansion was the last word in elegance, and was never surpassed by anyone else in town. It was the crowning effort of the Astorian Victorians and, even today, it is generally regarded as one of the best examples of Victorian architecture in the country.

John Hobson, one of the earliest pioneers, also ignored the hillside. He had already put up his home on the flat land in the early sixties and saw no reason to move. Erected before anyone else's, the Hobson house was as Victorian as any of the later ones and was certainly one of the hubs around which the Victorian Astoria society whirled.

The young people of Astoria, sons and daughters of the Astorian Victorians, created a society of their own, complete with parties, excursions, fancy balls, and cozy get-togethers in the parlors of the big, new houses. There were the Hobson girls, May and Maude, the Flavel girls, Nellie and Katie, Ada Ferguson, and Lillie Ireland. The Taylor girls, Katie and Mary, went around with Carrie Whitelaw, Annie Brown, and Carrie Van Dusen. The town was full of eligible girls, and there was no dearth of young, stalwart men to squire and court them.

Decorative Festivities

The Victorian love for the ornate, the decorative and the useless began to creep into the hitherto drab festivities of everyday life. At the Firemen's Bazaar, the women of the town went all out to make it conform to the dictates of Victoriana. Ireland attended, of course, and wrote it up afterwards, duly noting the colorful effort of Astoria's society at its best.

"Admirable taste was everywhere," he wrote. "And one naturally was grateful to those who had worked with charming success to render the hall attractive. It was festooned with evergreens, and wreaths, tastefully arranged, and the numerous flags made a charming contrast. Emblematic of the occasion, two lengths of rubber hose encircled the room.

"At the end of the hall, adjoining the stage, was a table covered with beautiful lounge pillows, worsted work, and also smoking gowns. The wax wreath, made and contributed by Mrs. Warren, was a marvelous piece of workmanship. Swords and revolvers nestled peacefully amid pin cushions and mats of rich materials and fine designs. Elegant hanging baskets were suspended from the decorations. The elephant suspended from the central chandelier was held in high esteem."

The years passed and Astoria grew and prospered. Ireland kept himself in the foreground, expanding his newspaper from a tri-weekly into a daily. He was twice elected mayor of the town, and used the official power of that office to perpetuate Victorian standards and morals. When President Rutherford B. Hayes came to town, DeWitt Clinton Ireland was the man who greeted and entertained the visiting chief executive. Much to his satisfaction, Ireland received an invitation to attend the final reception of the Hayes administration at the White House. When the time came, Ireland was there to see what Victorian society at its finest was like. He also attended the Garfield inauguration. He wrote full accounts of both of these events, and his readers back in Astoria devoured every detail of those two fine occasions, from descriptions of the food served, to a detailed, stitch by stitch description of Lucy Hayes' dress.

For ten years, Victorian society flourished in Astoria under the leadership of DeWitt Clinton Ireland. Then, he sold his beloved Daily Astorian to others, and moved on to other places and other things. What he had built, however, remained strong and vital. The Astorian Victorians marched onwards, through the final years of the nineteenth century, maintaining a cultured and decorative society in the isolated community on the Columbia River.

Today, Astoria is smaller than it was during the heydey of Ireland's reign. The salmon have departed, taking most of the canneries and fishermen with them. The rain forests have disappeared too, and the once busy sawmills are silent. Nothing new has come to town to take the place of these once great industries, and Astoria is once more a small, slumbering town, struggling to stay alive against the onslaught of the ecologists, the environmentalists, the bureaucrats and the people from other parts of the state who want to keep Astoria and Clatsop county untainted by industry, to serve as a playground for their leisurely weekends and vacations.

But up on the hill, the great Victorian houses still stand, their towers, piazzas, observatories and balconies staring out over the mists of the silent city. A symbol of a once great Victorian society, the houses are all that remain to provide the town with a reminder of what it was once, and what it could be again.

Roger Tetlow, an experienced journalist and historian who resides in Astoria, has written a biography of DeWitt Clinton Ireland.

Some of the Belles of Victorian Astoria.

Ada Ferguson, daughter of Albert Ferguson, prominent Astoria builder.

Ada Hobson, member of one of Astoria's oldest families.

Looking east on Grand Avenue in Astoria along one of the city's finest residential neighborhoods. From left, the houses were built by George Sanborn, Capt. J.H.D. Gray, and Albert Ferguson. The small house almost obscured was given to Ada Ferguson when she was married. The fifth house has been torn down and replaced by the residence of former Governor Walter Norblad.